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Valley Edition

**DRIVING PROGRESS THROUGH TOWN ON A RAIL;
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RECENTLY, the California High Speed Rail Authority released a report concluding that a high-speed rail project is the best way to meet the transportation needs of Californians in the decades to come.

Although many focused on the difficult question of how to pay for this mammoth project, Southern Californians should be aware that much of our region's transportation future hangs on the route that's chosen to serve the Southland.

The Rail Authority's draft environmental impact report envisions a bullet train that would carry passengers from San Francisco to Los Angeles in about 2 1/2 hours. It would also provide much-needed transportation through the Central Valley, and eventually connect with other key cities such as Sacramento and San Diego.

Although large public investment is needed to meet the state's growing transportation needs, high-speed rail is the least expensive and safest of the viable options. The report points out that our population is expected to increase more than 30 percent by 2020, and demand for intercity travel rising by twice that rate, the state must make transportation improvements.

Without a modern rail system, the DEIR forecasts the state would have to invest \$82 billion in highways and airport expansion to keep up with demand. Even then, traffic conditions on the highways are expected to worsen. High-speed rail would not only be half the cost (\$37 billion), but it would also save energy, reduce air emissions, reduce impacts from construction, increase economic growth and discourage urban sprawl.

Many questions remain unanswered. The first is how the cash-strapped state will pay for the project. Even as the lowest-cost viable alternative, the high-speed rail's \$37 billion price tag will require state, local and federal support. A \$10 billion bond measure originally slated for November will likely be put off until 2006 at the earliest.

Perhaps the single most pressing issue for Southern Californians is which route will connect Bakersfield to Los Angeles. Two routes are currently being proposed: one following the I-5 through the Grapevine, and the other heading southeast through the Antelope Valley in North Los Angeles County.

The Antelope Valley, one of the fastest growing areas in California and a last bastion of affordable housing in the county, is the most logical choice. Compare this to the virtually unpopulated and mountainous route through the Grapevine. Nonetheless, the Grapevine is still being considered because it shaves (at most) 10 to 12 minutes off the total travel time from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

Surely, most Southern Californians would agree that the benefits of the Antelope Valley route far outweigh the minimal time savings of a trip through the comparatively desolate Grapevine. Consider that, in 2020, the population of the Antelope Valley will have almost tripled to at least one million - and many of those residents will commute to Los Angeles on already congested highways.

The Antelope Valley route would help relieve commuter congestion on the I-5 and State Route 14, as Antelope Valley residents could be shuttled to downtown in only 26 minutes on the rail - much faster than the freeways. This would help free up the roadways for other L.A. commuters. It would also link important business centers in the Antelope Valley to help spur economic development and job growth, and connect Palmdale Regional Airport to Los Angeles to help relieve congestion at other Southland airports.

In stark contrast, the Grapevine route would link no major business or population centers, involve more tunneling and significantly higher construction risk, generate less ridership revenues, cross dangerous earthquake faults, potentially threaten parkland and do virtually nothing to alleviate our region's mounting traffic problems.

The California High Speed Rail Authority has said it won't pick preferred routes until its environmental reviews are finalized following a series of public hearings. The hearing in Los Angeles is scheduled for April 13. It is important that Southern Californians make their voices heard.

EDITOR-NOTE:

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